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The Conductor's Voice: Experiencing Choral Music

by

Patrick K. Freer

Part two in a three-part series

This is the second in a series of three articles exploring interviews of choral conductors. The list of interviews was compiled by David DeVenney¹ and extended through the June 2007 issue of the *Choral Journal*. The first article focused on how choral conductors describe components of “flow experiences” in terms specific to choral music. The third article will center upon how conductors describe their work, including issues of excellence, craft, career, leadership, pedagogy, and wishes for the profession. Conductors are identified within the text or in parentheses following the quotations.

Choral conducting involves an intricate balance between the needs of singers, the composer's intent, the demands of audiences, and the personal and aesthetic goals of the conductors. This article is comprised of quotations from choral conductors relating how they view the experience of singers, their own experiences, and how these influence the process of moving through rehearsal to performance.

The Experience of Singers

The Nature of Choral Singing

Morton Gould noted,

The great thing about music-making in any area is that here is this wonderful fantasy from which we can all derive so much pleasure, enrichment and food for the soul on many different levels. And no matter what level at which you are doing it, even if you are just starting out, there are all these horizons to move towards and that becomes a stimulating thing in and of itself.²

Gould's comments were echoed by Jameson Marvin:

In the performing arts, group singing is intrinsically one of the most human of experiences. There is no more poignant salve to the human condition than the sight and sound of voices joined together to express a commonality of spirit. That is the gift of choral singing.³

The sense of community created through choral music is made possible because “music is one of the most important things that a large percentage of people can relate to at one level or another. Without music this world would be a deadly place” (Allen Lannom).⁴ The importance of music in people's lives results from its “capacity to inspire, which allows the per-

former and listener to momentarily join together in a mutual communion of spirit that transcends everyday life experiences” (Jameson Marvin).⁵

As conductors,

We hope that through the choral experience all who sing will grow into deeper musical maturity as well as develop into fine vocal ensemble singers. We also hope the student grows spiritually in the broadest sense. The sharing, the cooperative venture in great art helps to make the singers more alive, more sensitive, and more perceptive as human beings with an awareness of something beyond themselves. They have the opportunity of knowing and sensing that which is reflected in the works and minds of people who are deeply musical and spiritual beings.

—Kenneth Jennings⁶

Lois Wells related,

Expressing the soul comes from the inside, and singing is so much a part of that expression because it also comes from the inside.... Vocal music is an expression of the soul because your voice is ‘you’ ... This is why I feel that in working with the voice I have the greatest tool for teaching. I prefer to think that I am teaching people rather than voice.⁷

Choral singing has permeated the educational and social fabric of American life during the past eighty years. “As we look at the history of American choral music, it is clear that this music was composed by American people, to be used by the American people. If people aren't participating in the art form, our future won't be significant at all” (Charles Bruffy).⁸ Participation in choral music will continue given that “there is something particular about singing that can touch the center of each of us. It is to singing that we gravitate in times of national peril and celebration” (Ann Howard Jones).⁹ For many conductors, then,

Our first objective is to give the singers an artistic experience at the highest level of which we're capable ... in this choir, given these students and this director. A choir is the shortest route that has yet been devised for giving the largest group of people a top-flight artistic experience with a minimum cost, although not a minimum effort ... The singers at least have their voices, so there is nothing that stands between them and this experience except their skill, their musical sensitivity, and their director.

—Leland Sateren¹⁰

Beyond the moments when singers and conductors join together for rehearsal or performance, there is the responsibility of conductors to prepare musicians for a lifetime of choral singing.

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Joseph Huszti spoke of this responsibility:

My approach is both intellectual and emotional. I want the singers to understand what is in the score. I want them to sing so that they are aware of what it is to create an ensemble. I try to give them musical know-how so that they can leave the university situation and be able to survive musically as individuals. We must arm our singers with tools enabling them to continue their growth as artists.¹¹

Focus on the Individual Singer

Most of America's choral singers are amateurs, and Robert Shaw spoke about their contributions to the choral art:

There's no doubt in my mind that the amateur motivation of music ('amateur' derives linguistically

from the Latin 'amo, amare,' to love) is extraordinarily precious, even to professionals. One of the sadnesses of a professional career in music is that it puts great strains on one's 'amateur' commitment One therefore lacks the freedom of self-expression that great art always should entail. The choral art's unique advantage, however, is that it allows participants to begin at an extraordinarily high level of creativity.... The great choral repertoire for some three to four hundred years has been justly acclaimed as one of the flowers of man's artistic and creative life, and to be able to participate in the expression of those creative masterworks is a great and ennobling experience for anyone. Certainly the art needs both professionals and amateurs: amateurs need professionals to learn professional technical accomplishment, and professionals need to remember

their early amateur commitment.¹²

Ralph Woodward spoke about Robert Shaw's commitment to the individual singer, saying:

A capable and insightful choral conductor can deal with wonderful voices and amalgamate them in a marvelous, unified effort in which everyone is still his own master. This is what Shaw does. He never stultifies the individual. Within the framework of his ensemble, everybody is singing well as an individual. He's not putting an anchor on that person's ability to express himself with his overall drive toward a choral unification. So, I don't believe that singers feel that they're parrots mimicking what the master has to say. They feel that it's welling up within them in a particularly genuine and singular fashion. That's why choral music at its best can be an unparalleled experience.¹³

The collaborative nature of choral music may be due, in part, as

Singers have not only the vehicle of the music but also the gift of the text to stimulate both the mind and the heart and to elevate them on a more personal level.

—Paul Salamunovich¹⁴

Other conductors note, "people who enjoy choral music love the participatory element. They want to come together with others who share their passion to make music. The emphasis is on the word 'together'" (Ann Howard Jones).¹⁵ Howard Swan concurred, "the great thing which happens in choral music is that there exists the personal communication: the mood of the person who sings."¹⁶

Several conductors in these interviews mentioned the importance of choral music in the lives of young children. Alice Parker related:

It seems that the one basic thing which connects people who sing is that they have been sung to and urged to join in when they were tiny. That's what really does it. The more

Friendship Ambassadors

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pleasurable that experience was with early home singing, the stronger will be the will to continue.¹⁷

Jing Ling Tam added that children "must be given the best teachers, environment, and experiences for the choral experience to survive in the century to come."¹⁸

Responsibility for the Singer's Experience

The shared experience of choral music requires that conductors remember that singers

Are not here because they are being paid to be here. They are here because they love it. So I tell myself: don't destroy that love. And that's not always easy to remember.

—Robert Shaw¹⁹

Like Roger Wagner, some conductors can recall "a time when intimidation was a regular part of my behavior. That came from immaturity."²⁰ However,

Since the first rehearsal of a piece is often a singer's initial contact with it, a conductor obviously wants that contact to be positive. With a positive experience, the singer can develop motivation and appreciation of what can aid the conductor in accomplishing high standards.

—Dennis Shrock²¹

Once singers

Realize they are achieving and being successful, they become more involved and cooperative. Everyone wants to be a part of a good thing. Success breeds success.

—Michael Nuss²²

Allen Lannom spoke of the need for all people to be involved at all times, avoiding multiple select or elite ensembles formed from the larger group. Said Lannom,

This makes for good programming, but it does not make for the building

of a good chorus in most situations. If people belong to a chorus, they want to sing and be a total part of it.²³

However, the success or appeal of a specific experience may need to be developed over time. Regarding repertoire, Lois Wells said:

I believe the music we sing must appeal to the singers but the appeal must grow as they rehearse. We must have respect for our students. We must value their time and not waste it learning insignificant literature.²⁴

Therefore,

Program-building should meet the audience's need for ...contrast, but, more importantly, the singers need this same variation and variety. It is terrifically important on a day-to-day basis that the rehearsals be refreshing and renewing and contain revitalizing experiences.... Otherwise, the singers and the conductor may begin to feel such an unrelenting sense of sameness that it could become oppressive.

—Douglas McEwen²⁵

Goals for Singers

Several conductors in these interviews spoke eloquently about the goals they have for the singers in their choral ensembles. Weston Noble said,

So many of us vividly remember our first musical experience. It was a beautiful feeling where everything seemed so right. Our entire person came into harmony. A most beautiful part of our inner being had surfaced. To experience this again and again! Our potential for change can never be the same after such a realization. And therein lies the objective of our choral program: to make contact in an unforgettable way with our inner person. We will then strive to repeat this experience in whatever way possible, yes, even to eliminating the

negative to enhance the potential of the positive.²⁶

Albert McNeil added,

My first objective is to give students a unique experience in choral music. For many of them, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I feel a very deep obligation to create an excitement in the music program.

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For this reason, the literature must be of the highest quality. I want the singers to have an artistic experience in which they really have to work to accomplish what the music requires I want them to have an arts experience which is going to be genuine. I want them to have experienced a wide range of choral music ... So, in answer to the question, I want my students to have broad musical experiences that include attention to blending, breathing, sight-reading, and vocal production.²⁷

In addition to providing the technical skills necessary for success in choral music,

I really believe that people today desperately need something to which they can commit themselves. So many people are not committed to anything But I believe that

in the field of the creative arts we can get the kind of commitment that goes beyond the barriers of the generation gap. We've been doing this for generations. So, it's an important part of my program now that the people who come out week after week find something to which they can give themselves for a time, and thus find a fulfillment which is personal and musical.

—Allen Lannom²⁸

Iva Dee Hiatt similarly spoke of

Doing something well, doing something beautifully, and evolving personal attitudes and standards of excellence which they can take with them after they leave the college experience.²⁹

delighted, compelled, exhilarated, drawn to music."³² Colleen Kirk similarly "found music fascinating and satisfying. I discovered that I really cared to bring people and music together!"³³

Weston Noble related how, during his junior year at Luther College,

The director of the Schola Cantorum asked me if I would take a rehearsal in his absence. I had never known a feeling like this! I immediately dropped my keyboard major and knew nothing could equal the experience of conducting.³⁴

Likewise, Ralph Woodward

Found that conducting was a means of expressing myself that I enjoyed, and that's how it happened. I got hooked and I've never regretted it. I can't wait to get to it in the morning. I can't wait to get to my job, and I can't stand the idea of retiring.³⁵

Conductor Experience

Music as Career and Passion

The choral conductor's experience requires

[Casting] away one's inhibitions so that he or she can be expressive and develop a compassion for people and for singing. There should be a human need for music, not just a personal gain.

—Eph Ehly³⁰

For many conductors, this need for music became apparent at an early age. Paul Salamunovich wrote:

When I was young I was the world's greatest introvertThe chorus became a vehicle for expressing myself. I could hide in the midst of other singers—hide in the music. Basically I do the same thing in conducting. I let the persona of the music show through me.³¹

For Iva Dee Hiatt, choral conducting "chose me, I think. I simply couldn't stay away from it ... I was simply fascinated,

Richard Cox added, "I'm really into performance, and I really love music. I guess when one loves music and loves performance, one is not really happy doing anything else."³⁶

Many conductors spoke of their interaction with singers as a particularly satisfying characteristic of the conducting experience. Paul Salamunovich said:

I have a vision in my head of what I want to hear and I try to communicate this to the people in front of me using everything I can muster from my imagination. I may sometimes look foolish in the attempt, but I don't care, because I have something to share and, after all, isn't that the ultimate joy of conducting—to share your knowledge, experiences, joys, and desires, and receive them back as beautiful gifts when singers realize them in the music.³⁷

Allen Chapman remarked:

One of the consistencies with me and my work is that I genuinely like to sing. I think it is more than an enjoyable activity, it's a fulfilling activity. I know I convey this to

Nancy Wertsch

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young people—I'm not sure exactly how I convey it, but I know it is conveyed.³⁸

Collaboration

For some conductors, the personal interactions with other conductors are highly valued. Howard Swan related:

During the late '30s or early '40s, a group of about a dozen or so of us organized ourselves into a group called the 'Rumstumps—the disreputable ones' Once a month on Friday we could come together at 4:00 p.m. and discuss various local and choral problems Then, someone suggested forming a chorus from our church and college choirs. Each man supplied a quartet of the best singers he knew. We would appoint three men to work each time ... and each of the three

directors was given forty minutes to conduct two pieces After the third man had finished, we would dismiss the choir and start in on a 'post mortem.' It was a wonderful learning experience; we were all such good friends and nobody was sensitive to any criticism.³⁹

In response to a question about his work with Julius Herford, Roger Wagner reflected:

Well, first of all, he taught me to dig in the score. He taught me to appreciate the beautiful architecture in music of the great masters. He told me how to translate this order into highly charged emotionalism when it was required. He taught me how to control. He taught me the importance of phrasing, the importance of knowing what the score was—not just going through it. You know, being able to start at the

beginning and yet think of the last eight bars so that it was a complete monument. And when I conducted the B Minor by memory a week after I worked with him on it, I did it simply because he had analyzed it with me in such detail that I could see it developing.⁴⁰

Robert Shaw similarly spoke of his professional relationship with Robert Fountain, relating:

We conduct each other's groups sometimes. I immediately feel at home with his chorus, and I think he enjoys conducting mine. I love to get hold of his group—I can feel they have 'making music' as a purpose.⁴¹

Repertoire Choice

In addition to selecting repertoire to meet the needs of singers and audiences,

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conductors in these interviews expressed how repertoire contributes to their personal experience as conductor. Daniel Moe offered:

I suppose that every conductor, by virtue of what he or she is as a human being, is going to select music which is a reflection of his or her particular musical bias and prejudice. In fact, the selection of the literature becomes a kind of reflection of oneself. I love the phrase that Bruno Walter used, 'A conductor must become possessed by the music.' I believe this, and it has been a guiding principle in my life. I need to be possessed by the music. Then there is hope that I can transmit the music so that the ensemble itself is going to be possessed, convinced of its essential worth. Only then is there the possibility that we can communicate to our listeners in such a way that we'll possess them with it.⁴²

Leland Sateren agreed.

Above all, directors must select and perform music that they like—in the deepest and best sense of that word: music that makes a special appeal,

that draws them to it, that they would give an arm and a leg to bring to life in sound, that thrills them as they work with it. With it they will do their best work. Egocentric as this sounds, and as confining as it may be, it is imperative that they truly like the music they are doing. Short of that, they'll never reach the music's essence.⁴³

Dale Warland spoke of the specific qualities of repertoire that promote these optimal experiences, including:

Originality and freshness, craftsmanship, vocal suitability, texts of substance, appropriateness for the occasion, duration, instrumentation, and most of all, music that 'grabs me.' The conductor must always be excited about any given work to be programmed.⁴⁴

Charles Bruffy added,

I need the piece to 'speak' to me. In every case, the text is of primary importance. It's like a good book, I like to be compelled to turn the page and see how the mystery of the chords unfolds and resolves or doesn't. Whether considering a

newly written piece or a staple of the repertoire, the work must be gratifying for the listeners, singers, and me."⁴⁵

Occasionally, the most satisfying repertoire develops through collaboration with composers. Kathy Saltzman Romey related, "it is extremely important to collaborate with living composers in the presentation of music from our time. It is the relationship with the artist, and the participation in the creative process, that I have found to be so enriching for my ensembles and my own growth as a conductor."⁴⁶

Larry Wyatt added that careful attention to programming can help conductors ensure a balance between the needs of the choir and the needs of the conductor. He said,

I try to group pieces into sets, usually by period, with variety of tempo, texture, and key relationships taken into consideration. I often try to find relationships between some of the works, either within the sets or between the sets. By choosing these goals in program-building, I feel that I can at least partially avoid the problem of exposing the students only to music which matches my personality, abilities, or moods at the time I am constructing the program.⁴⁷

Rehearsals

Many conductors in these interviews expressed their love of the rehearsal process. Robert Page noted,

I save all of my energies for the rehearsal. In that two-and-a-half hours I come alive. I erase everything else from my mind, and I expect the singers to do so also.⁴⁸

Lois Wells added,

At least once in every rehearsal I hope to be able to get very excited about something in the music or in the sound to help them react to the music. I'm not very inhibited, and if I'm thrilled, I'll ask for a cup so that I

Hal Leonard

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can scrape off the goose bumps!⁴⁹

Conductors also referred to the educational components of rehearsals. Alice Parker addressed the rationale behind her famed approach to working with inexperienced singers:

By doing the teaching by ear and allowing people to improvise, you go immediately to musical values, which gives me great satisfaction.⁵⁰

She added, though, that she draws great personal pleasure from work with her professional chorus, relating,

One of the great joys of it is that I am working with people who can sight-read their way through anything. I start rehearsal at the point where I might often end rehearsal with another group. In other words, we can go right to fine tuning of articulation and communication without going through that struggle for notes.⁵¹

Relationship with Singers

The personal satisfaction of conducting fine performances can be mitigated by the knowledge that

I certainly can never reach every student I have. I wish I could. As long as I've been teaching I haven't found the way to make every student feel successful. There are lots of kids each year I feel very bad about.

—Sally Herman⁵²

The close personal relationship between singers and conductors means that choir members often

Become like family. I won't say that this is important for everyone. I know some very successful conductors who do not feel this way. The most difficult day for me is the day my singers graduate. I never want to let them go, and I often feel angry at them for graduating.

—Larry Wyatt⁵³

Conductors in these interviews often stated that a central component of their personal choral experience was their relationship with their choirs. For Paul Salamunovich, "Music may be the catalyst that brought us together initially, but the added get-togethers have helped make many of us friends, some for life."⁵⁴ Dale Warland related that these relationships make:

A conductor's job much more

interesting and fulfilling. If singers know that you are interested in them, the choir will have an additional important role in their lives and in yours.⁵⁵

Iva Dee Hiatt addressed a conflict inherent when simultaneously leading and participating in the choral experience, relating:

World Projects

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Often I move off the podium when I'm conducting and walk down an aisle while I keep the singing going. This does not substitute for a real personal relationship, I know, and this is something that concerns me a great deal I wish I knew the individual singers much better.⁵⁶

Lois Wells also referred to her relationships with choir members when she was asked what music she would take with her if she were to relocate to a remote setting. Wells responded,

I would take people. Rather than taking music or recordings, I would take people so that the music could come to life I feel that the singers are an extension of me. They are my voice. They are my instrument on which I play....⁵⁷

Challenge of Perfectionism

Stan McGill spoke of the challenges associated with striving for musical perfection with his choirs:

I never fully appreciate one of my performances because I'm always annoyed with what is wrong. Too many times choir directors think while they're preparing music for performance that certain things don't matter—a missed note

or faulty intonation. I don't think anything wrong is OK. I try to perfect the music even though I know I never will. And, I try to savor music—to take my time, not rushing, to ponder the elements of beauty. This allows me to detect possibilities. Too many people rush through music preventing the mind from absorbing it. And in addition to this, I think you need to be experimental and creative with music and rehearsals so that interest is always maintained."⁵⁸

But, the challenge associated with producing high-quality performances can also be a source of great satisfaction for conductors. Donald Neuen related,

The Crystal Cathedral presents a great challenge. Every broadcast is seen throughout the United States, and in 200 foreign countries by 31 million people. It is a wonderful opportunity to be challenged to achieve perfection every Sunday. Not just musically perfect, but spiritually-impacting perfect so that peoples' lives are meaningfully touched by our singing each and every week.⁵⁹

Roger Wagner defined this quest for musical perfection more simply, saying:

You know as I know that the

greatest thrill in music is the unison. And when you get a perfect unison, chorally speaking, it is probably the most satisfying sound.⁶⁰

Achieving a musically satisfying result often requires that conductors

Not get in the way of the power of our great art! We may know a great deal but we sometimes become stumbling blocks for what we are trying to create. The personal responsibility of each conductor as to his or her inner makeup is of utmost importance. To understand our inner person is a challenge in itself; to change it is a triumph. I am accomplishing both, so, in a very real sense, music is changing my life. Thus, I feel that I get less and less in the way of the power of the music. This means singers and audiences are more deeply affected—our ultimate goal.

—Weston Noble⁶¹

This article was about the experience of singers and conductors during the making of choral music. The intertwining of these themes can be found most succinctly in the words of Dale Warland who, thinking forward to retirement, stated, "Most of all, I will miss having my own 'instrument' and not being able to build and mold the ensemble."⁶²

The final article in this series will continue with the words of these conductors about their experiences during specific aspects of preparation, rehearsal, and performance. These aspects will include issues of excellence, craft, career, leadership, pedagogy, and these conductors' wishes for the profession.

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